

A Deal's A Deal

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A Deal's A Deal

by [Pipergirl17](#)

Summary

When Beth Greene finds her muse for a photography contest, she gets more than she expected: a close encounter with Merle Dixon and, a handshake later, the promise of a date with his brother Daryl. Whatever has Beth gotten herself into!

Notes

This is a story I wrote years ago and just realized I haven't posted it here. It was my first Bethyl fic, and I was super excited to share it. Well, it still holds a place in my heart so I'm sharing it again (with a few edits) My beta at the time was eweknow, whose feedback and ideas I'm still grateful for.

I must note that I did stray a tiny bit, though, by making Beth a few years older than she is in the television show; although it's easy to fathom a relationship between an 18 year old and a 40 (ish) year old in apocalyptic times, it's a bit more of a stretch in our own reality.

As always, please take a few moments to leave some feedback below--they're like virtual snickerdoodles to us authors :)

See the end of the work for [more notes](#)

Quiet days at the store were always welcome. Those were the times where Beth Greene felt like she could accomplish anything and everything that was thrown her way.

She had dusted, swept, cleaned, and reorganized the shelf under the cash register, and now she was sketching a concept for a new display supporting the High Museum of Art's upcoming exhibition on the 1950's.

That was her favourite thing about working at Penny Lane, a store that specialised in kitsch and memorabilia: not only was she allowed creative license, it had actually become part of her job description.

The small store had earned a partnership with Atlanta's High Museum of Art, edging out over other small shops in Georgia because Penny Lane had been the only applicant to offer to support the museum's secondary exhibits--it would increase presence of mind for tourists, save the museum a bit of money on advertising and, of course, increase sales for the store.

The idea had been Beth's and Lynn, the store's owner, had given her all the glory. Lynn had been like a second mother to Beth, always supportive and encouraging. Although the younger woman had started out simply as an extra hand on deck, manning the cash and tidying up, she quickly showed a talent for designing eye-catching displays.

"Still quiet?" A voice from behind her asked.

"Yeah," Beth replied, turning to smile at Lynn, who had just walked in from the back of the store. "Had a couple o' folks come in but they were just browsers."

She slid the piece of paper she'd been working on across the counter. "What do you think? I thought maybe we could do something for that new '50's exhibit comin' up next month." The young woman pointed to her sketch. "We got that ol' table in the back room--the one with the metal strip runnin' around the top--that looks like it's from the 1950's. We could set it up in the window with those padded bar stools around it and that tabletop jukebox on it. And we got lots of pastel melamine plates. It'd look just like the real thing."

"That's a great idea, Beth!" Her boss exclaimed, beaming. "We could probably add some of those old Elvis concert posters I've had in the back room since forever." She shook her head in amazement. "Whatever would I do without you and your ideas, hon?"

"Aww, don't say that." Beth couldn't help the pink that coloured her cheeks. "The store's been around forever, Lynn--I'm certainly not the one keepin' it going. I'm just grateful you give me creative license."

"That creative license is what's been attractin' more and more tourists to the store, Beth. You've got such a talent for putting displays together--I couldn't come up with half o' what you've dreamed up. Oh, and speaking o' which," she reached in her purse and pulled out a pamphlet, handing it to the young woman, "I picked this up for you. Thought maybe you'd be interested, with all them lovely pictures you been posting on Facebook."

Beth accepted the leaflet, looking it over. It announced a photography contest, with the winning photographs to be displayed in an exhibition at the local armoury. She looked up at Lynn shyly. "You really think my pictures stand a chance o' winning?"

The other woman laughed out loud, placing a hand on her shoulder. "Honey, you're too modest. You got yourself a gift. You see things in people and nature that no one else's thought o' looking' for. Or maybe they haven't been able to see it." She closed Beth's hand around the pamphlet. "This is your chance, Beth."

Lynn was right. This *was* the chance Beth had been waiting for, as small a crumb as it seemed. She hadn't gone to college like Maggie had, having been more interested in the arts than math or science. And now she had a chance to prove herself in a field in which she was an amateur but aspired to become more. She'd taken classes, had invested in professional equipment, and had even worked as the photographer for a few weddings.

"You're right," she said with conviction. "I'm gonna take the most amazin' picture and I'm gonna win this contest."

"That's the spirit! Now how 'bout you get an early start on your evening?" Lynn shooed Beth off her seat, waving her hands at the young woman.

"Are you sure?" Beth asked, the prospect of walking out into the hot summer afternoon outweighing half an hour's wages.

"Yes, I'm sure. Now scoot before I make you close up and do the accounting."

Beth didn't have to be told twice; the threat of having to crunch numbers was enough to get her moving. She grabbed her bag and slid her sunglasses on as she rushed out, wishing her boss a great night.

A wall of heat hit her when she stepped outside. Even in the late afternoon the mercury was still through the roof and, if the forecast was correct, things wouldn't be cooling off much even after sundown.

She crossed the street to where her car was parked, the photography contest heavy on her mind. Sure, it wasn't a groundbreaking career opportunity but it was a chance to test the waters, to have someone who wasn't a friend or a family member validate her talent.

Windows rolled down and The Black Keys playing on her stereo, Beth pulled her Yaris out onto Main Street, merging with the afternoon traffic.

This was her third summer in Blossom but the young woman still found it difficult to get used to the crowds of tourists who used the small town as a stop on their way to local peach festivals. Growing up on her daddy's farm, she'd been about as far removed from crowds as possible. Maggie's stories of driving through Michigan on her way to study at the University of Michigan had her wondering why anyone in their right mind would choose to live in big cities.

Although nowhere near as large as Ann Arbor, Blossom was still bigger and busier than Beth was accustomed to. Nerves frazzled by being caught in a tide of out-of-state license plates, she hung a right on the first available side street.

Maybe, she thought, *I'll get some ideas for my picture*. Driving through the labyrinth of small streets, she kept both her eyes and her mind open. Would she snap a picture of nature? People? A man-made structure like the old tannery just outside of town?

She was so focused on deciding the theme for her picture that she hadn't realised she'd driven into a part of town that was unfamiliar to her. She pulled up to an intersection with a four-way stop and looked at her surroundings. To her right was a garage which looked like it might have been open back in the 1940's; an old Pennzoil sign, rusted and faded, still hung above the shop's one dusty window. Ahead of her was a group of industrial buildings--factories, or warehouses perhaps--most of which seemed just as abandoned as the garage. To her left was a street that had houses; this seemed the safest route to try, as some of the people loitering in front of the garage were beginning to take notice of her.

She put her signal on and made the turn, relieved when the group of men on the sidewalk turned their attention back to their conversation. She drove slowly, tamping down the sense of panic which was trying to bubble to the surface. It would do her no good to lose her head in this neighbourhood.

And then she saw it: her muse, her inspiration for a winning picture. Had she taken a moment to consider it, she couldn't have said why this particular house stood out from the others; the homes in this neighbourhood were all in varying states of disrepair. But Beth had learned not to second-guess her intuition when it came to photography. Lynn had once joked that it was a case of 'shoot first, ask questions later'.

She parked her car across the street and took a moment to observe the immediate neighbourhood. A few houses down, a group of boys were playing a lively game of basketball; next door to them a man had his head under the hood of a truck that was up on blocks. All in all, it didn't seem much different than what you'd see in any corner of Blossom, with people out talking in their front yard, others puttering around in their flowerbeds, women pushing strollers; it was just more rundown than most other neighbourhoods.

Beth rooted through her bag, grabbing her camera, before stepping out of her car. She viewed the house through the lens, trying to find an angle that would convey what it was that she saw. Just then the door opened and a man in his late forties, dressed in a stained tank top and dark blue pants, walked out. At first he hadn't noticed Beth but it didn't take long for him to turn towards her as if she'd been on his radar.

"Hey there, Blondie," he called out in a gravelly southern accent, sauntering across his yard in her direction. "There anythin' I can do you for?" His lips spread into a feral grin that didn't quite meet his eyes and for a moment Beth felt like an antelope in the line of sight of a lion.

"Your house caught my eye," she replied, matching his friendliness but remaining wary. She partially bridged the gap between them, walking as far as the sidewalk in front of the house, hand firmly on her camera. "I was wonderin' if you'd let me take a picture of it."

He narrowed his eyes and gave her a once-over. "You with the town?" he asked. "Told 'em I'd get the front yard cleaned up by the end of the month. No need takin' any pictures."

"I'm not with the town," she confirmed, not at all surprised he'd been ordered to clean up. Despite the lower socio-economic status of the neighbourhood many of the houses on the street had lawns which were well cared for, whereas his had a patch of gravel in front of a neglected flower bed. "It's for a photo contest."

The man perked up at the mention of a contest. "Well, well," he cooed, walking right up to her. "There a cash prize to this 'contest'?"

Beth shrugged, smiling apologetically. "Nope. Just braggin' rights. They'll be displaying the winning pictures at the town armoury."

The man's smile faltered at this bit of information and he leaned in, his tone more threatening than friendly. "Not much in it for me, then, is there?" His eyes swept from her face to her chest and back up, and his predatory smile was back. "Although I'm sure we can think of some way you can pay me back..."

Beth froze when his fingers reached out to brush a lock of her hair behind her ear. This had gone from comfortable to dangerous in the bat of an eye and she was way out of her element. She'd never had to deal with men like this, sheltered from the worst of the world on her daddy's farm. She knew, though, that showing weakness would give him more satisfaction so she stood her ground, rooted immobile on the spot, her heart beating a mile a minute.

"Merle!"

They both turned to look at the man who was walking out from behind the house. He was slowly making his way towards them, a crossbow hung across his back. He was younger than 'Merle', and was dressed in a pair of loose-fitting cargo pants and a sleeveless button-up shirt.

Taking advantage of the distraction, Beth took a half-step back away from Merle. He noticed, his eyes flitting to her and then back to the other man, but he didn't say anything. Oddly enough the hungry look had left his eyes, replaced with a gleam of mischief. "I got a better deal for you," he said quietly, his gaze flitting between the approaching man and her. "You can take whatever pictures you want of my house, but if you win you gotta go on a date with my brother."

Her mouth opened, but nothing came out. A date? With his brother?! How desperate did he think she was for those pictures, anyway?

"What ya up to, Merle?" the younger man asked as he reached them. He put himself between Merle and her, facing his brother. She took the opportunity to take a full step back, finally able to breathe comfortably again.

"Ain't up to nothin', Daryl. I was just chatting with..."

“Beth,” she confirmed, her voice steady now that there was more distance between her and Merle.

“That’s it. I was just chatting with Beth, here. She’s a photographer. Thinks she can win some contest with a picture of our house.”

The younger man turned to look at her, an incredulous look on his face. “What the hell kinda contest you enterin’? Slums o’ Coweta County?!”

He was more ornery than his brother, but Beth didn’t mind. She could handle someone who was grumpy much easier than someone who was deceitful.

She smiled at the notion of ‘Slums o’ Coweta County’. “No, nothin’ like that. It’s an open contest. No theme. There’s just something about your home.” She turned to look at it again, biting her lip. “It’s like there’s a story to tell...”

“Ain’t no good stories comin’ out of that house. You’re gonna want to take me on that one,” Daryl said darkly, unable to look her in the eye.

“Well, then, maybe it’s a sad story, but it’s there nonetheless,” she countered. She turned to Merle and held her hand out. “I’m willing’ to accept your deal, Merle.”

And she was, to her surprise. The prospect of spending time with Daryl wasn’t nearly as daunting as the thought of even just speaking with his brother. Merle had been aggressive and threatening from the moment their exchange had begun, going out of his way to step into her personal space. Had the younger man been anything like him she would have declined and moved onto a new subject for her picture; but he hadn’t given her any reasons not to trust him. Quite the opposite since he had purposefully blocked his brother’s path, essentially protecting her.

And anyway, she thought he was kind of cute, in a scruffy way.

The older man grinned, all of his teeth showing like an alligator’s. “You’re a stubborn one, Blondie, I gotta give you that much. You sure you can handle my brother?”

Beth looked up at Daryl, who was rightfully confused. She nodded, smiling. “Yeah, I’m sure.”

“The hell you two talkin’ ‘bout?” the object of their deal asked, visibly irritated.

“Beth here agreed to go out on a date with you if she wins.”

"What?!"

“You heard me, Darylina. Time you started lookin’ at women ‘stead o’ huntin’ every minute of every day. Ain’t doing you no good being on your own all the time. Betcha Beth here can show you a good time,” he turned to her, a leer in his gaze, “ain’t that true, honey?”

Beth looked up at Daryl and smiled apologetically before turning around. No way was she getting involved in an argument between these two. She walked back across the street, trying

to find the perfect angle for the photograph, the two men still arguing. When she heard Merle yell "Baby bro, how long's it been since you had yourself some cootch?!" she covered her mouth, trying her best to stifle a laugh.

What on earth had she gotten herself into?

Four weeks later...

Beth hung up the phone, momentarily stunned. "I won," she said to her empty apartment. "I actually won!"

The young woman squealed and did a dance on the spot before catching herself mid-jig. Self-conscious, she looked out her window and was relieved to see her little outburst had not been witnessed by any of the folks going about their business outside.

She leaned back against the wall, holding her phone to her chest, a grin plastered on her face. It didn't matter that the photograph was going to be displayed at the town armoury and not at a fancy museum like Atlanta's High Museum of Art. What mattered was that someone had seen the same stark beauty in the brothers' home than she'd seen.

And that someone wanted to put her photograph on display, to share her vision with the public.

Just then, a memory pushed its way through all her self-congratulating, something that had been hovering on the periphery of her thoughts from the moment she submitted her entry. Winning the contest meant she had to honour her agreement with Merle: she had to go on a date with his younger brother Daryl.

She was half-tempted to drop her end of the bargain, to pretend she'd forgotten, but Beth was too honest a person for that. As scary as the prospect of dating Daryl was, the thought of weaselling out of a deal was even less palatable.

But how would she get in touch with them? She hadn't thought of taking down their phone number at the time (did they even have a phone?) and she sure as hell didn't want to have to go back to the house, no matter how much it had been her muse. It just wasn't worth another encounter with Merle. Hell, she didn't even know their last name.

She sat down at her phone table, one of the many pieces of furniture her mother had foisted on her when she had moved from home, and placed her chin in her hands, thinking.

"Think, Beth. Who would know two troublemakers from the wrong side of town?" She sighed, answering herself. "I bet the folks at the Sheriff's department are the only people they have regular contact with."

And then it struck her. The police would have their number! But how likely would it be that they'd actually give out their phone number to her? Would that contravene any privacy

laws? What if she explained why she needed it? Would that help her case?

What if I just sit here all day asking myself questions? she thought wryly.

The Sheriff's department was her best bet and it wouldn't do her any good second-guessing herself till the cows came home. Gathering her courage, Beth dialed the precinct's number and let out a breath of relief when Rick Grimes answered the phone. She'd never felt at ease around the other Deputy Sheriff, Shane Walsh; he seemed to be following his own agenda, and wasn't always on the up and up. But Rick was good people; he was honest and trustworthy and had always given folks in the county reason to look up to him.

"Sheriff's department," he answered, his tone professional and courteous.

"Hey Rick," she said, kicking herself internally for not having come up with a thorough story *before* calling him. "It's Beth Greene."

"Hey Beth," he replied. "How are things? Your dad still planning on the barn raising at the end of the month?"

"Yeah, he's starting to gather everything he needs but he ain't too worked up about it yet. I think Mom is more concerned about what to cook for all them people who'll be comin' by to lend us a hand."

Rick laughed. "Your momma's cooking is the best in the county; she shouldn't be worryin' about that. Now, how can I help you today?" he said, getting back to business.

"Well..." she hesitated, "it's a bit of an odd request and I'm not really sure if you'll be able to help me or not. I sorta need to get in touch with someone and I don't have their phone number and I couldn't find it in the phonebook so I was hoping you'd have it. I don't know their last name, but they're brothers; their names are Merle and Daryl."

"Merle and Daryl Dixon?! Why on earth would you need to contact them?" he asked, his tone both puzzled and concerned.

Yep. Of course he knew who they were. "I entered a picture of their house in a contest and promised I'd give them a call if I won and, well, I won."

"Is Merle askin' you for money? Part of your prize, maybe?" he asked, exasperated, as if it was something that happened all the time. She could almost hear him pinching the bridge of his nose.

"No, no! Nothing like that," Beth replied right away. Of course it was more than that--a lot more than that--but she wasn't going to let Officer Grimes in on *that* part of the deal.

"Well, as long as he ain't pressurin' you into anything. You really don't want to get mixed up with that Merle Dixon."

"I *promise*," she confirmed. And it was true. Merle Dixon wasn't pressuring her for money. "Anyway, it's more Daryl that I need to talk to."

"All right, then. Daryl's a good man; he ain't trouble like his brother," he said. "Let me see what I can do for you." He put her on hold and Beth listened to the messaging that played over the phone, reminders of noise restrictions, pet licensing and community events like the upcoming antiques market.

"Beth?"

"Yeah?" she replied.

"I got a number for you."

"Great!" She grabbed a pen and pencil and jotted down the number he gave her, thanking him for his time and his help, and hung up.

The next call wasn't going to be as pleasant. A small part of her (ok, a *big* part of her) hoped no one was home and she could convince herself that at least she'd tried. But that would just delay the inevitable, because her conscience wouldn't just let her try once and end there.

"Might as well get this over with," she muttered.

Paper in hand, she dialled the number and waited while it rang. After the fifth ring, a male voice answered. "Lo?"

Beth hesitated; this wasn't Merle's voice, but Daryl's. She cursed her luck, remembering how upset he'd been over the deal; it would have been so much easier to talk with the older Dixon brother, no matter how nervous he made her.

On the other hand, maybe Daryl would tell her to fuck the hell off and hang up, and this whole ordeal would be over.

"Look, I know someone's there cause I can hear you breathing. Quit wastin' my fucking time already..."

"Daryl?" Beth finally blurted out, her heart hammering in her chest. She couldn't tell if she was more nervous or afraid.

"Who's this?" he asked, even more gruffly if possible.

"Beth Greene," she said, wincing at how lame she sounded to her own ears. Flashbacks of her first call to Jimmy's house so many years ago flipped through her mind like an 8mm film reel. Thing was, she wasn't 16 anymore; she was older now - *a simple phone call shouldn't make you this nervous*, she berated herself. "I'm the one who took a picture of your h..."

"Yeah, I remember you. Guess this means you won that contest, huh?" .

She was silent again, stunned not only at his recalling of who she was, but also of the contest. "Uh, yeah," she finally managed to reply. "I did. They... they actually loved it."

"They loved a picture of this dump?" he asked incredulously. "Were the judges high or somethin'?"

Beth chuckled. "Don't be silly," she said kindly. "They just saw the same beauty in it that I did."

"What the hell beauty is there? It looks like it's straight outta Hoarders."

"Ya gotta look beyond the surface," she countered. "It's like when you see a really old lady, and she's all hunched over and her face is really wrinkled. Sometimes if you look hard enough you can see the young woman she used to be. That's part of her beauty: the life she's lived to get from one point to the other. I saw that when I looked at your house, the bits of gingerbread woodwork still lining the peak o' your roof, the addition that's half finished, the flower beds that still have roses in 'em amongst all them weeds... I wanted to capture its story."

There was silence at the other end of the line; Beth wasn't sure if Daryl was mulling her words over or if he'd put the phone down and just walked away after having his ear talked off. She was starting to wonder if it wasn't the latter when he spoke up.

"Don't know if I agree with you or not, but I guess I see what you're sayin'," he finally answered. He cleared his throat before adding "Guess we need to make plans to go out, huh? A deal's a deal."

"Yeah, guess we do," she replied just as awkwardly, twirling the phone cord around her fingers nervously. Call her old fashioned, but she'd always dated men she'd known. This was as much uncharted territory for her as it likely was for Daryl so it was best to keep it simple. "We can just meet up at Rosie's for dinner if it suits you."

He let out a breath, a sign he'd most likely been expecting something fancier. "Yeah, it suits me. What day's good for you?"

"Let me check." Beth stood up, looking at the calendar on her wall. With Lynn on vacation for the week, it was up to her to close the store, so it would have to be a late dinner. Unless they postponed until the following week, which she doubted Daryl wanted any more than she did. "How about Thursday night?" She asked. "I gotta close up the store where I work, but I could make it to Rosie's for seven. Hope that's not too late."

"Nah, seven works. I can meet ya then. You plannin' on us doing' anything after dinner?" He'd added the last part quickly, and Beth knew he wasn't so much asking to do something as he was preparing himself in case she was expecting it. Truth be told, she hadn't thought that far ahead. If they made it through dinner, they could always decide afterwards. *If* they made it through dinner.

"Hadn't thought about after dinner," she admitted. "We can just play it by ear, decide what we wanna do then."

"That's fair." After a long pause he grunted impatiently. "Well, I guess I'll see you on Thursday then."

Beth nodded, even though he couldn't see her. "Yup. See ya on Thursday."

He hung up without a goodbye and Beth sat there, staring at her phone. She knew, beyond a reasonable doubt, that Thursday's entry in her diary was going to be a long and colourful one.

The bell above the door chimed as Beth walked into the air conditioned diner, the stark difference in temperature causing her skin to erupt into goosebumps. She rubbed her arms and cast a glance across the restaurant, looking for Daryl.

When she didn't spot him she walked over to a booth, selecting one that looked both out onto the parking lot and the door. Heck, she wasn't even sure if he was going to show up. He certainly hadn't sounded overly enthused over the phone; he'd sounded more like he was making an appointment for a colonoscopy than agreeing to have dinner with a girl.

Maybe it was one and the same for him, she thought wryly.

"Evenin' Beth," a waitress greeted warmly, placing a glass of lemonade in front of her. "You on your own tonight?"

"Hi Lisa," the young woman replied, smiling back at the older woman. "I'm actually meeting someone; he should be here soon."

"I'm actually meeting someone; he should be here soon."

"Ooh..." The server teased, her eyes twinkling at the prospect of a bit of gossip. "Finally found yourself a young man, huh? Who's the lucky..." Something outside caught her eye, and she sighed, shoulders sagging. "Dang. There goes my quiet shift."

Beth's attention was pulled from the scene outside her window back to her server. "What's wrong?" she asked, curious.

"Them Dixon boys," the other woman frowned, pointing her pencil at the truck. "Well, mostly Merle. He's a right pain in the ass on his best behaviour. The younger one's quieter, but they're both trouble."

Daryl Dixon walked through the door and the women's conversation stalled. Beth's mouth dried at the sight of him. He hadn't seemed like much to look at back at his house a month ago, wearing a flannel shirt with the sleeves cut off and a pair of dirty cargo pants, but he'd obviously taken the time to wash up.

Dressed in a plain black t-shirt and a pair of blue jeans--clean ones--he walked over to the booth where Beth was seated, ignored Lisa, and took the bench across from the young woman.

The server stared at Beth, her heavily-penciled eyebrows hiding under her bangs. Once the shock of discovering who Beth's date was wore off, she turned towards the man and asked him "The usual?" The warmth which had been present in her conversation with Beth was gone altogether. When the man nodded once and didn't say anything she walked away, her shoes squeaking on the linoleum.

Beth watched as Daryl nervously surveyed his surroundings, his eyes scanning the diner's other patrons before falling on her.

"You clean up pretty nice," she commented, unable to hide the small smirk that pulled at the corner of her lips. He stared at her, eyes narrowed, back ramrod straight, obviously trying to figure out whether she was being sarcastic. "I mean it," she added quietly, looking him straight in the eye. "I 'preciate it."

He finally nodded, deciding to take her word at face value. "Thanks," he said, before adding "you, uh, you look good too. Yellow's a nice colour on ya."

"Thanks," she replied, feeling her cheeks flush. She'd taken the time to change out of her work clothes before heading over to the diner; she knew the white blouse, blue peasant skirt and strappy sandals she'd been wearing would have been overkill for dinner with Daryl Dixon, so she'd opted for a pale yellow sleeveless blouse and a pair of jean shorts.

She grabbed the menus and offered him one, but he shook his head.

"Nah, I always get the same thing."

"What's that?" she asked, putting one menu back and opening the other.

"Banquet burger and fries, gravy on the side."

"Well, how 'bout we kick it up a bit and share an appetizer?" Beth offered, trailing a finger down the list of items. "They got potato skins and nachos. Oh! And they have calamari now! Do you like calamari?"

"Dunno what that is," he admitted, shrugging. He was still staring at her with uncertainty, his body language very defensive, as if he was expecting her to laugh at him and walk away like the date had been some sort of social experiment or practical joke.

Beth leaned over the table and whispered "It's squid," laughing out loud at the horrified face he pulled. She noticed a few of the patrons were casting curious glances their way, most likely surprised at the unusual pair she and Daryl made. She'd never cared much what folks thought of her and she sure as hell wasn't going to start now.

"Scratch the calamari, then," she said, still chuckling. "How 'bout the potato skins? You like those?"

"Never tried 'em, but they gotta be better'n squid," he replied, the first hint of humour tinting his words.

Lisa returned with a bottle of Budweiser and placed it in front of Daryl. “The usual for both of you?” she asked, looking squarely at Beth.

“The usual for me, but maybe you should ask Daryl what he wants,” the young woman replied politely, perturbed on Daryl’s behalf at how the server seemed to be ignoring him. “I’m sure he can order for himself.”

Lisa got the hint and turned to face Daryl, cheeks pink from having been chastised.. “What can I get ya?” she asked in a much more professional manner than before.

“We’ll start off with an order o’ potato skins,” he said, casting Beth a mischievous glance. “and I’ll have the hot chicken with mashed potatoes.”

“Of... of course,” the server stuttered, obviously confused, jotting down the order on her notepad. “I’ll be back with the potato skins in a jiffy.”

“Hot chicken with mashed potatoes?” Beth giggled. “You rebel, you.”

“Ol’ bat deserves it,” Daryl huffed, watching her retreat to the kitchen. “Always treats me and Merle like pieces o’ shit.”

“You sure Merle doesn’t deserve a bit of it, maybe?” she asked tentatively, remembering how much of a troublemaker the elder Dixon had been. “Merle looked like the kind o’ man who likes attractin’ trouble.”

Daryl sneered, pointing at her with his chin. “You know, I’m sick o’ folks like you judging us just cause we never been privileged like you. Growin’ up with all your nice clothes and your schooling, thinkin’ you’re better than us...”

Beth sat up straight, leaning forward, his accusation bristling her. “And who’s the one who’s judging’ now? Have I done anything’ to make you believe I think I’m better than you? I was simply making an observation based on what I seen o’ your brother. He wasn’t exactly a saint when I met him.”

Her words deflated him and he sighed, sinking back into his seat, picking at his paper placemat. “You’re right. You been nothin’ but fair to me; you didn’t deserve any of it. I’m just sick o’ being treated like shit by everyone.”

“Well, maybe you should start actin’ like the person you want folks to treat you like, Daryl,” she said.

“What the hell’s that supposed to mean?” he asked defensively.

Sighing, Beth tried to think of a way to get her point across without making him angrier. She rested one elbow on the table, cupping her chin in the palm of her hand, and looked outside.

“Those boys,” she said, nodding towards a group of teenagers headed towards Sam’s Food Mart. “If you were Sam and saw them all come in at once, what’d be going through your head?”

Daryl stared at the boys she'd pointed out. "I'd be keepin' a close eye on 'em, make sure they didn't steal nothing."

"Now, what if they pulled their pants up to their waist, tucked their shirts in and straightened out their ball caps? Would you be watching' those three boys as closely?"

He pressed his lips together, seeing where she was leading him. "Probably not," he admitted. He tore his eyes away from across the street and aimed a skeptical gaze over the table. "You sayin' I need to dress better?"

"No," Beth said, smiling and shaking her head. "I'm sayin' that instead of pulling faces at people when they say hi, you can just nod at 'em politely, and maybe you can say thanks instead of grunting. You just ain't giving folks reason to treat you nice."

Daryl stared at her evenly as he digested her words, not giving an indication as to whether he accepted her theory or whether he thought she was full of shit.

Before the young woman could press her point further, their server arrived with their appetizer. "One order o' potato skins," she announced, placing the dish between them. "You need anything else right now?"

Beth cast a quick glance at Daryl, silently communicating with him. When he shook his head she turned back to the server. "Nope. We're good, Lisa. Thanks."

Just as Lisa was turning to leave, Daryl spoke up with a clear "thanks". The older woman looked at him, momentarily shocked to hear him speak, and her gaze softened, a smirk tugging at the corner of her mouth. "You're welcome, hon," she replied, leaving Daryl stunned.

"See?" Beth said, "you respect folks and they'll respect you back." She reached over and took one of the potato skins from the dish and took a bite, closing her eyes in rapture as she savoured the first bite. "You might want to grab one while you still can, otherwise you'll be left starin' at an empty plate."

"Alright, alright, I'll try one." Daryl grabbed one of the appetizers and examined it before trying a bite. He let out an indignant huff before stuffing the rest of it in his mouth. "Don't let this go to your head," he mumbled through the mouthful of starchy, cheesy goodness, reaching for a second one.

"Scout's honour," the young woman replied, raising her hand and leaving three fingers up.

They made short work of the potato skins, the plate pretty near licked clean. Beth kept to her promise, not once offering him a glib "I told ya so", even though she really, really wanted to. Instead, she racked her brain for suitable (and safe) topics of conversation she could use to put an end to the silence that had taken over.

"You always live in Blossom?" she asked, finally coming up with a question.

"Nah," he replied. "Was born over in Ogdenville, 'bout fifty miles southeast o' here. Moved to Blossom with Merle and my dad when I was eleven."

"What about your mom?" The question had just come out unbidden, past the switch and straight through the gates. Horrified at her tactlessness, Beth clamped her hand over her mouth. "I'm sorry, that's none o' my business, Daryl. I shouldn't o' asked that."

"S'alright," he answered; his composure was slightly shaken but he brushed it off. "My mom died just before we moved here. She passed out while smokin' in bed. Nurned the house down with her in it."

"I'm sorry." It seemed like so little, but it was all Beth could really offer.

Daryl frowned. "Not your fault she was a drunk. You don't need to apologize."

"I ain't apologizin'. I'm just sorry you grew up without a mother, s'all. Kids need their moms." Beth couldn't imagine what her life would have been like without her mom, without her shoulder to lean on, her sage advice - and yeah, she'd been right about Jimmy, and how first loves weren't always intended to last - and, of course, her therapeutic baking. There hadn't been much that a few fresh-out-of-the-oven cookies couldn't fix.

"Don't matter. She and my old man were cut from the same cloth. 'Cept she didn't beat... Never mind," he cut himself off. "Let's talk 'bout somethin' else, ok?"

Beth nodded, forcing herself to ignore his slip. She took a sip of her lemonade, scouring her brain for something to talk about; finding a safe topic of conversation with Daryl was akin to brokering peace talks in the Middle East.

Her eyes were drawn to his arms, tanned and muscled. It was as she wondered what he did to stay in such good shape that an image - a memory, really - popped into her mind. The day she'd taken the photo, when she was at his house speaking with Merle, Daryl had come around the corner of the house with his crossbow slung over his shoulder.

"Why a crossbow?" she asked, mentally high-fiving herself when he sat up straight and stared at her keenly. "Why not hunt with a gun?"

"Any idiot can hunt with a gun," he replied dismissively. "Need a lot more skill to hunt with a crossbow. For example, you gotta be able to..."

To be honest, Beth didn't care one way or another about crossbows. But she nodded and leaned forward and asked lots of questions both because the topic was important to Daryl and because it was drawing him out of his shell. When their meals arrived the conversation continued to flow from one topic to another, albeit with a significant effort on Beth's part, and they both relaxed a bit, the awkwardness from earlier decreasing a little.

After dinner they walked back to the truck and Daryl leaned against it, arms crossed and one leg bent, the flat of his boot resting against the door. He looked like James Dean, if Dean had been a socially-awkward thirty-something redneck.

Beth bit back a smile at the thought, knowing full well he'd ask her to share what was so funny. She'd tell him the truth - she was such a bad liar - and the evening would be over. And she wasn't ready for that because she was actually having fun. Daryl didn't expect her to be anything but herself, didn't ask questions just to fill the silence, and didn't look at her like he was trying to figure out how to get into her pants.

"What now?" he asked gruffly, biting the skin on his thumb. His gaze had been locked on something in the distance, but he turned his head to look at her when he spoke to her.

The young woman walked over to where he reclined, standing a fair bit farther away than she would with most people but close enough to make Daryl visibly uncomfortable. She found she liked pushing him, that maybe he needed it a bit, to have someone pull him out of his shell.

Beth wanted to keep chipping away at who Daryl Dixon really was without the smoke and mirrors of his gruff attitude and foul mouth.

"I'm sure," she said, tilting her head upwards and staring at the sky, "you know all the best places for stargazin'."

Her suggestion must have taken him by surprise because he turned his head suddenly, looking at her with narrowed eyes, trying to suss out if she was pulling his leg. "Stargazin', huh?" he asked, still uncertain.

"Yep," she replied, smiling at him. "Can't see 'em real good in the city, even a small one like Blossom."

"And you think I'm the kinda guy who just knows where all the good stargazin' spots are?" He sounded insulted, but Beth knew he was just acting tough.

She took a step closer, impressed when he stood his ground. He simply stared at her, head cocked, trying to figure her out. "You mean do I think you're the kinda guy who needs to get away from everything every so often? Daryl Dixon, I bet you have the best hiding spots," she teased.

He surprised her by laughing out loud, a genuine, honest-to-god laugh. "C'mon," he said, opening the driver's side door. "Get in 'fore I change my mind."

Beth ran around to the passenger side and jumped in, a thrill of excitement coursing through her. A small corner of her mind told her that asking a guy she hardly knew to drive her out to the middle of nowhere was probably not the smartest thing she'd ever done, but she'd always been bang-on with reading folks - she was a lot like her daddy that way - and Daryl just didn't ring any alarm bells.

They drove in a comfortable silence, the city lights soon fading behind them. Daryl had a collection of cassette tapes strewn across the seat between them and Beth couldn't help but smile--it was all so... *Daryl*. He was a man stuck in the wrong century, never mind the wrong decade.

She was wishing there was more light so she could see what kind of music he listened to when she remembered the small flashlight she kept on her keychain. She fished through her purse, found it, and turned it on, picking one of the tapes up.

"Somethin' wrong?" The light had momentarily pulled Daryl's attention from the gravel road they were on, and he threw her a couple of quick glances.

"Nope," she replied. "Just lookin' through your tapes."

"You want some music on?" he asked, turning the truck off the road and onto a field.

"Nope," she repeated, unable to keep the teasing out of her voice. "I'm just bein' nosy. I kinda like the quiet."

She heard him mutter "me too" but didn't take her eyes off the Metallica tape she held in her hand. She grinned at the hand-drawn sleeve, a chair with a lightning bolt going through it, and put it back down, reaching for another. Before she could see more than a quick glance at the next one (Motorhead, this time) the truck stopped and Daryl cut the engine.

He'd driven them to a vast clearing, a copse of trees in the distance the only shadow around. The air that came in through her open window, still hot and muggy despite the sun having already set, clung to her skin and made it hard to breathe. Beth loved it, though, loved the Georgia heat, the humidity, the weight of the air as it settled over her like a mantle. It made her think of sitting out on the porch, listening to the frogs chirping and eating her mom's peach cobbler.

"Well?" Daryl broke the silence and turned her thoughts to the here and now. "You wanna see stars or what?"

Beth smiled at him, unsure if he could even see it in the dark, and tugged on her door handle. The door opened with a protesting creak and she had to slam it shut with both hands.

She turned around and gasped at the sight before her. The sky was carpeted in stars, millions of them, all bright and twinkling down at them.

She walked around to the back of the truck and watched Daryl as he dropped the tailgate and hopped onto the truck bed. He lifted the lid on a box that was lying against the cab and pulled out a blanket, shaking the dust off of it.

"Bed's dirty," he explained a bit self-consciously before offering her a hand up. He straightened one corner of the cover with the toe of his boot and shrugged. "Not sure if the blanket's much cleaner, though."

"Don't matter much to me," Beth reassured him before sitting down. "I grew up on a farm. I'm not afraid of a bit o' dirt."

Daryl sat close beside her, not having much of a choice in the confined area, and reached into his chest pocket. He lit himself a cigarette and leaned back, one arm supporting his weight, and looked up at the sky.

Beth turned her head to watch him, seeing him try his damndest to look calm and collected like sitting in the back of his truck with a girl was something he did all the time. But she caught the slight tremor in his hand when he brought his cigarette to his lips, she saw how rigid he held himself, ready to bolt at the slightest hint of danger.

She could have called him on it, could have teased him, but that would have been cruel; instead she lay down and turned her eyes back onto the stars, trying to locate the few constellations with which she was familiar. The blanket beneath her was soft and thick enough to cushion her from the worst of the truck bed's ridges, and it smelled like a mix of gasoline, wood and cigarette.

Out here, in the silence, in the dark, she felt bolder than she would have had it been midday. Cautiously she reached over and pressed the back of her hand against the side of Daryl's thigh. He jumped, startled, but didn't inch away from her like she'd expected.

"I don't bite, ya know," she teased. "Not hard, anyway," she added, more shyly.

Daryl crushed his cigarette on the side of the truck and flicked it over the edge. "Anyone ever tell you you're odd, woman?" he asked, looking down at her from where he sat.

Beth couldn't help but laugh. "My sister Maggie. She once told me I could probably make friends with the devil if he ever showed up on our doorstep."

He chuckled and lay down beside her. "You're nothin' like any woman I've ever been with, you know that?"

"How so?" The young woman turned on her side, facing him, her head resting in the palm of her hand. She itched to reach out and play with the hem of his t-shirt but held back, focusing instead on studying his silhouette.

"For starters, you got more brains than boobs. After that, you're sober. Ain't never had a sober woman interested in me."

"Well, I'm stone cold sober, Daryl, and I'm interested in you." Her voice had turned out a hell of a lot huskier than she'd intended, and Beth was glad for the cover of night to hide the blush that crept up her cheeks.

His head slowly turned to face her. By now her sight was accustomed enough to the dark for her to see the surprise in his eyes.

Might as well go whole hog, she told herself. "You ever fool around in the back o' your truck?" she asked breathlessly, caving in and reaching out to play with the soft fabric of his

shirt.

"It's Merle's truck," he corrected, his voice just as hoarse. He turned over onto his side, mirrored her position, and reached out to lay a tentative hand at her waist.

She felt the corners of her mouth pull up into a wry smile. "You ever fool around in the back o' *Merle's* truck?"

"Can't say I have." His breathing was shaky, the only sign his nerves were shot, but Daryl stayed put, facing her. His fingers became more bold, sliding against the skin just above the waistband of her shorts, leaving a trail of fire in their wake.

His gaze never left hers, somehow asking her permission and making sure he wasn't dreaming all at once. Beth inched closer to him, the pull of her body towards his more than she was willing to resist. She leaned forward, her eyes flitting to his lips, telegraphing her intentions.

Daryl pulled back at the very last moment, leaving her confused.

"Is something' wrong?" she asked him, concerned.

"You sure your daddy ain't gonna come after me with a shotgun if we do this?"

His hand had crept under her top and was pressed firmly against the small of her back, making it hard for her to focus, but she understood his underlying question.

"Daryl, how old do you think I am?"

"Dunno," he shrugged, looking away. "Eighteen?"

She laughed out loud, holding him firmly in place when he seemed ready to bolt. "I'm twenty-two," she told him, highly amused. "Old enough to be with whoever I choose."

"In that case..." Daryl took her by surprise, crushing his mouth to hers, a growl forming at the back of his throat when she returned the embrace just as passionately. Beth's tongue darted out tentatively, tracing his lips; when his own tongue came out, sliding against hers, exploring her mouth, she felt like an electrical charge was flowing through her. She moved against him, her hand exploring the taut muscles of his arm, the curve of his shoulder, and the back of his neck, where she traced invisible designs with her fingernails. He pressed the hand which rested at the small of her back, crushing her against him. Beth followed his lead, hooking her leg over his hip, pulling him closer to her.

She'd be the first to admit that her brain had willingly taken a back seat, leaving her body firmly in charge. Daryl felt good against her and it had been too damn long since she'd been with a man.

His mouth left hers and he rolled her onto her back as he placed wet kisses down the column of her neck, his tongue darting out to taste her. "You smell so good," he whispered against her skin. Beth didn't know what to say to that so she pressed herself up against him, feeling a sense of womanly satisfaction when his ministrations faltered.

She dragged her hands down his sides and felt his muscles working as he held himself above her, nestled at the apex of her thighs, rocking to the rhythm she'd set. When she reached the hem of his t-shirt her fingers slipped underneath and she began to slide the fabric upward, revealing his back to her touch.

He froze the instant she felt them: grooves and bumps, the same marks that marred her own daddy's back. In that moment she understood Daryl Dixon, understood the path he'd walked along to become the man he was and respected him all the more for it. He'd deny it, so she wouldn't tell him (not now, at least) but he was a lot like her own father, someone who had managed to remain a good man despite it all.

Daryl began to pull away, both physically and emotionally, but Beth held him tightly. "They ain't important, Daryl," she told him, her gaze hard and serious. "They only show where you've been, not where you are. Not *who* you are."

He stared back at her, his eyes narrowed, his lips pulled together in a thin line. "And who am I, then?" he spat out sarcastically. "You know me what, a couple hours and you think you know me?!"

"I know you're a man of honour," she threw back firmly, her voice calm but holding no pity. "You kept your end of a bargain you were pulled into against your wishes." She pressed on, poking him in the chest. "and I know you're a man who's got morals, cause you were holdin' back, thinkin' I was younger. Ain't many men I know who woulda been strong like that."

Beth sighed, looking up into his eyes, seeing the self-doubt that plagued him. "You're right. I've only known you for a bit, but even *I* can tell you're your worst enemy, Daryl." She reached up, cupping his face in her hand. "You ain't dumb, you ain't a bad man, you're just a bit rough 'round the edges, s'all."

He choked out a mirthless laugh, shaking his head. "Goddamn it. Don't need this turnin' into a fuckin' therapy session."

"Then don't let it," Beth purred, stirring beneath him and leaning up to brush her lips against the skin of his throat. "Think of it more as takin' a step forward."

Daryl shifted above her, groaning in pleasure. "Step forward, huh?"

"Uh-huh," she confirmed, her tongue tracing the shell of his ear.

"Then I gotta ask," he said, pulling back and gazing down at her soberly. "What is it you really want? You just looking for a fuck, or you looking for more than that? Cause I gotta know what you're expectin' before we do this."

Before I give too much of myself to you. Beth knew that's what he meant. A man like Daryl didn't hand his heart out to anyone; he was laying himself on the line, asking her what her intentions were.

It was easy being honest with him because she knew they both wanted the same thing. "After this, I expect you'll drive me back to my car at the restaurant. Then I expect you to give me

the kinda kiss that'll make the town talk for weeks." She laughed out loud at the horrified look on his face. "And then, Daryl Dixon, I expect you'll call me and ask me out on a second date."

Daryl's face broke out into a shy grin. "Think we're gonna need to practice that kiss, though. Not sure if we're quite up to snuff yet for town gossip."

Beth's giggle was cut short when he pressed his mouth to hers passionately, cupping one hand behind her head, threading his fingers through her hair. His other arm snaked under her lower back, holding her close to him, letting her feel just how much she affected him.

Their skin was slick from the heat and their fooling around, and soon the only thing on Beth's mind was removing the clothes that separated them. She snaked a hand between them and began to fiddle with Daryl's belt buckle. It took a few moments for him to clue in to what she was attempting but he eventually sat up and pulled his t-shirt off while Beth worked on his belt.

"Hold on," he said, stilling her hands. He stood up and hopped off the truck, and Beth watched curiously as he walked around to the passenger side door, opening it. She could hear him grunt as he rifled through the cab until he muttered "*finally!*" and tossed something onto her lap before slamming the door shut. She stared at the box of condoms and raised one eyebrow at him.

"You can thank Merle for those," he said as he pulled himself back up onto the truck bed, standing at her feet. "Insisted I take them with. Somethin' about the infinite wisdom of an older brother."

She placed the box at her side within easy reach. "Your brother share any other 'infinite wisdom' with you?" she asked, craning her neck to look up at him.

"Yeah," he admitted, reaching behind and rubbing the back of his head self-consciously. She couldn't see him in the dark, but Beth would have bet her favourite horse that Daryl was turning all shades of red.

"What'd he say?"

Daryl snorted, sounding half amused, half embarrassed. "Said to jack off before meetin' with ya so I wouldn't embarrass myself."

Beth took in a sharp breath, her mind instantly filled with images of him in the shower, steadying himself with one hand against the wall and the other stroking his cock, the water trailing down his skin, his eyes closed in rapture. "Oh..." She managed to say, her own breathing becoming increasingly laboured.

Propped up on her elbows, she watched him as he popped the button and unzipped his fly, slowly lowering his pants and underwear. He got them down to his ankles before realising his boots were still on his feet. Daryl groaned and shook his head. "Christ almighty," he muttered darkly. Before he could bend down to remove them Beth was kneeling at his feet,

pulling at their laces. She didn't dare look up because she knew full well what would be at eye level, so she focused on her task before standing up to face him.

Daryl kicked his boots and jeans to the side. "Bit overdressed for the occasion, dontcha think?" He teased, his fingers tracing a path down the side of her throat to her collarbone. He undid the buttons on her blouse one by one, exposing her skin to his heated gaze, his mouth and tongue following his fingers' path.

Beth moaned and leaned into him, grateful for the steady circle of his arms. He slid the blouse down her arms and tossed it off to the side before leaning forward and brushing his lips against her creamy skin. His tongue traced the edge of her bra, following it to the valley between her breasts. He paused and hummed appreciatively, bringing his hand up to release the front clasp. When he pulled away to slide the garment off, he gave her a crooked smile, one eyebrow raised.

"You're not the only one with an 'infinitely wise' sibling," she shrugged, smiling shyly. Then he kneeled before her, sliding her shorts down her lean legs, her flip flops falling off to the side. "Daryl," she whispered, not knowing what she was pleading for.

"C'mere," he said, taking her hands in his, gently tugging her back down to where he kneeled. Beth lowered herself, lying back down on the blanket. She stretched one leg out to his right and bent her other leg, placing the flat of her foot on his left thigh. It crossed her mind how odd it was for her to feel so familiar with Daryl, to bare herself so openly and willingly to him. Perhaps it was because he'd done the same; he'd exposed himself emotionally and physically. She had a feeling he'd never before taken his shirt off in front of another woman. He was putting himself out on a limb because he saw something in her that was worth risking the safety of his status quo.

Feeling bold, she raised her foot from his thigh to his shoulder, her pale skin a stark contrast to his dark tan even in the moonless night. His eyes met hers before he reached out to steady her leg, pressing a kiss to the inside of her ankle; his lips travelled the length of her calf, his tongue darting out to taste her skin, and Beth didn't even try to hold back the throaty moan that had been building.

"Oh Lord, Daryl," she said, curling her leg around his back and pulling him to her.

"First time I try to do right by a woman and it's all 'just go on and put it in me, already'," he teased, holding himself above her and reaching for the condoms.

Beth laughed - when on earth had she ever laughed during sex? - and reached up to kiss his neck. "You can take all the time in the world later to do right by me," she promised. "But right now it's been so long and I want you so bad," she confessed, reaching between them to take him in her hand. She stroked him slowly and firmly, her palm rubbing over the slick head of his cock.

Daryl sat up on his haunch, freeing both hands to fiddle with the box of condoms, pulling out a small square packet. He finally managed to tear it open, fingers unsteady, and roll it on. For a moment he sat still as if he wasn't sure what to do, but before Beth could do or say anything he leaned forward and slid inside her in torturously slow.

They both let out a low moan at the sensation of their coupling, Daryl muttering something that Beth hadn't quite caught. "What was that?" she asked, straining to hear him.

He stilled his movements and took a deep, calming, breath. "Said I shoulda jacked off more'n once," he replied, dead serious.

"I don't think either of us'll last long," she admitted, "'cause I'm already close." She matched his languid pace, planting her feet on the truck bed and meeting his slow, deliberate thrusts. When his lips left hers, sliding across her cheek and peppering her jawline with kisses, Beth reached up to tangle her fingers in his hair. It had been so long since she'd been intimate with a man, and she'd forgotten how wonderful it felt to have someone else look after her needs.

The angle of his thrusts changed when he brought his mouth down to one of her breasts, and Beth felt the telltale tightness just below her navel. "Daryl," she whimpered, squirming beneath him, her hands gripping his biceps. When her release finally washed over her, wave after wave of pleasure hitting her, she threw her head back and moaned, not caring if she attracted the attention of every single person across five counties.

Daryl followed soon after, ducking his head into the crook of her neck, cursing as he thrust his release inside her. They remained intimately linked as they both rode off the high of their climaxes, waiting for their breathing to return to normal.

Beth trailed her fingers up Daryl's arms and over his shoulders, being careful to avoid his back. He must have sensed her reticence because he pulled away from her neck, looming above her. "S'ok," he assured her, "no use in hidin' anything from you anymore."

The ridges felt harsh to her touch, wide strips criss-crossing under her fingertips. "I wanna replace all your bad memories with good ones," she whispered, brushing her lips against his.

"You already started," he replied, the corner of his lips pulling up into a boyish smirk.

They lay there, simply enjoying the quiet - even the crickets had gone to bed by then - until Beth realised one of the grooves on the truck bed was pushed against her spine.

"I think I'm gonna have to move. I've got something' pressing' up into my back," she said, regretting her words as soon as he lifted himself up off her. They dressed in silence, folding the blanket and putting it back into the box. Daryl hopped to the ground, holding his hand out to help her jump off the tailgate.

"Time to head back?" He asked.

"Fraid so," Beth replied regretfully. "I gotta open the store tomorrow mornin'. I best get a good night's sleep."

He simply nodded, walking over and opening the passenger door for her. She hopped in, pushing aside the things he'd disturbed in his search for the condoms, and buckled herself in.

Daryl surprised her on the drive back by being more chatty than he'd been all evening. "You like workin' at the store?" he asked as he drove down the gravel road, rocks bouncing off the truck's undercarriage.

"Yeah, I do," she admitted. "Lynn, the owner, is real nice. She's got a wicked sense o' humour and always keeps us in stitches. She's the one who pushed me to enter the contest. If it wasn't for her, we wouldn't o' met."

"Been a long while since I had a real job." He took his eyes off the road, offering her a quick glance. "Most o' what I been doing' for the last couple o' years has been followin' Merle around, doing whatever he needs me to do, most of it under the table if you know what I mean." He sighed and reached for his smokes, lighting one. "I'm gettin' too old for that shit, though. It'd feel good to have a bit o' honest cash in my pocket again."

Beth thought long and hard before she replied, knowing full well that it was more complicated than a simple case of Daryl getting up the next day and finding himself a job. From what she could guess, Merle cast one hell of a shadow over his younger brother, and that wasn't something easily addressed. "When you're ready, you'll make your own decisions again, whether or not Merle likes it."

He nodded, exhaling a lungful of smoke out his window. "I've a feelin' it's gonna be sooner than later," he muttered, not saying more on the subject.

Blossom's lights came into view and they were back at the diner before she knew it. Beth pointed her car out and Daryl pulled the truck into the spot next to where it was parked, cutting the engine. They both exited the vehicle, meeting at the driver's side door of her Yaris.

"Looks like I met your first expectation," he joked, tapping his hand on the car's roof. "Gotcha back to your car."

"Mmm-hmm," Beth agreed, bridging the gap between them and running a hand up his chest. "I believe there was a second expectation, though; somethin' a bit more exciting."

She'd expected him to balk, honestly she had; she'd expected him to talk himself out of it, to kiss her on the cheek and wish her a good night. After all, there were still lots of folks milling around taking advantage of the nice weather; they'd already drawn a few stares simply by being in the same truck. In a small town like Blossom people notice things and they talk about them, make up their own stories. Beth's mother always said that the best fed thing in a small town was the grapevine.

What Beth hadn't expected was for Daryl to go above and beyond fulfilling her "second expectation", lifting her off her feet and pressing her between his body and her car, his mouth hungry on hers, one hand twisted in her hair and the other under her ass, holding her up. Eventually, he pulled back, eyes still dark with desire, easing her back down on her own two feet, although how he expected her to stand on her own after *that* kiss, she didn't know.

"We can discuss the third expectation later this week," he whispered, still out of breath. "Night, Beth."

“Night, Daryl,” she managed to reply before opening her door and falling into her seat, her heart still beating a mile a minute. She looked straight ahead and found herself staring at a diner half-filled with gobsmacked patrons.

One thing was for sure. Blossom's gossip mill would be fueled for weeks to come.

End Notes

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